

WITNESS CONSCIOUSNESS



When the mind is steady, we can see a little truth. When the mind is disturbed, we can't see anything. Growth allows a portion of the mind to remain an objective witness even in the face of disturbance. This witness is always there, if one can keep a wakeful attitude.

—SWAMI KRIPALU

Being present is the experience of being in the moment. As you learn to sustain this experience over time, your practice ripens into what Kripalu Yoga calls *Witness Conscious-*

ness, the ability to closely observe what is occurring without reactivity or judgment. Witness Consciousness is a homecoming to reality, a silent “yes” to the truth of whatever is happening. Like a mirror that accurately reflects whatever comes before it, Witness Consciousness helps you know things as they are. This non-reactive awareness emerges naturally from regular Kripalu Yoga practice. You need do nothing more than be fully present in your body—moment by moment—and the light of Witness Consciousness will gradually dawn.

The practice of Witness Consciousness lengthens your attention span and develops your powers of concentration. More important, it strengthens the crucial ability to bear the direct, moment-to-moment experience of being alive. Engaging Witness Consciousness,

you can closely feel and watch the inner flow of sensation, emotion, and thought without losing yourself in reaction. As your ability to experience the spectrum of human experience broadens, you can slowly let go of the defenses that protect you from uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, but also drain vitality and wall you off from reality. Witness Consciousness allows you to persist in the face of the so-called distractions that inevitably arise in spiritual practice—obsessive thinking, self-judgment, blame, comparison, and boredom—and learn that they are actually grist for the mill of awakening. At first Witness Consciousness is something you practice, a technique employed to develop your latent capacity for higher awareness. As the witness awakes, you begin to see it as an innate quality of the mind and integral aspect of your being.

I found my compassionate witness through Kripalu Yoga. I was thirty and my life was in terrible turmoil. Being in a Kripalu Yoga class helped me endure the emotional roller coaster I was riding. Finding calm and peace even temporarily kept me from totally falling apart.

I didn't have any sudden "aha" moments, but rather the slow dawning of being more and more conscious of my thoughts, emotions, inner dialogue, and overall attitude. I saw that I had created the turmoil in my life. Now I had a tool to examine and evaluate it with compassion.

Despite years of therapy, self-help

study, and group work, I had somehow missed the vital ingredient of a compassionate witness. The ability to look at myself and others with equanimity, yet with a tender heart, opened a whole world for me. I feel like I have a secret to life that makes the world make sense.

— Carol E. Klammer

Attraction and Aversion

Yoga philosophy teaches that the oneness at the heart of creation expresses in the world as pairs of opposites, or *dvanda*. This spectrum of opposites starts out on a universal scale—spirit and matter, energy and awareness, wave and particle, time and space, day and night. It descends all the way into your personal life—self and other, pleasure and pain, love and hate, happiness and sadness, joy and grief. The dualistic nature of life is not a problem that you can solve; it is simply the way the phenomenal world of time and space manifests.

Confronted by a world of opposites, the mind has a natural desire to want to experience one side of the polarity and not the other. Everyone wants pleasure without pain, happiness without sadness, success without failure. Yoga refers to this tendency as *raga and dvesha* meaning *attraction and aversion*. Attraction leads the mind to seek out what it likes. Aversion leads it to avoid what it doesn't like.

The instinctive forces of attraction and aversion are natural and healthy. They guide you to make appropriate choices to meet the basic needs of the body. But difficulty arises when you attempt to govern your internal world of thought and feeling through attraction and aversion. Adopting a strategy of seeking pleasure and pushing away pain and discomfort, you find yourself at war with life. No matter how you strive, your internal experience always includes a mix of pleasure, pain, and both sides of life's many polarities.

Contemporary science has proven that space and time, the very building blocks of the universe, are not separate entities but rather smoothly linked parts of a larger whole called the space-time continuum. Yoga has always taught that all pairs of opposites are interrelated parts of an indivisible whole, two ends of



Engaging Witness Consciousness activates the intuitive mind. Over time, it helps you shift into the Authentic Self and realize the True Self.

the same stick. Witness Consciousness is a practical way to integrate these opposites and harness the energy of wholeness. By neutralizing the dualistic forces of attraction and aversion, it allows you to rest in a non-reactive awareness able to sense the unity underlying diversity. Intimate with whatever is arising, free of any compulsive need to change it, you are able to see reality clearly and embrace both sides of life.

The internal freedom of Witness Consciousness does not equate to external passivity. In fact, it leads to a greater freedom of action. When a decision is required, you are able to explore your desires, and the thoughts that surround them, with great clarity. Rather than being blindly driven by your likes and dislikes, you are free to make conscious choices and follow through with appropriate action. Giving up the losing battle to have pleasure without pain, you can feel more at ease with the mixed bag of experiences that is life.

A Whole Body Experience

Witness Consciousness is not an intellectual strategy to distance yourself from life. Nor is it a skillful technique to prevent disturbing thoughts and feelings from entering your awareness, or a way to avoid pain and discomfort by dissociating from your body. Witness Consciousness transforms the yoga mat into a laboratory for exploring your internal

THE WITNESS GOES EVERYWHERE

In *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self*, Stephen Cope identifies six primary characteristics of Witness Consciousness:

1. **The witness does not choose for or against any aspect of reality.** The witness does not split life into good and bad, right and wrong, high and low, or spiritual and not-spiritual.
2. **The witness does not censor life.** The witness allows all thoughts, feelings, and sensations to receive the light of awareness, without discriminating.
3. **Witnessing is a whole-body experience.** Instead of an intellectual exercise, the witness receives experience by feeling the reverberations of sensation with the whole physical-emotional organism.
4. **Witness Consciousness is always present at least in its potential form in every human being at every moment.** We don't have to create the witness. This enlightened quality of consciousness needs only to be recognized, evoked, claimed, and cultivated.
5. **The witness is capable of standing completely still, even in the center of the whirlwind of sensations, thoughts, feelings, fantasies—even in serious mental and physical illness.** The witness can objectively observe dramatic or intense experiences even as we're having that experience.
6. **The witness goes everywhere.** The witness is connected to the quantum field of mind and matter, standing outside time and space, living in the eternal now.

world of feeling and thought. Engaging Witness Consciousness, you stand right in the middle of your experience. Encountering the pull of attraction and aversion, you do not follow its lead, choosing instead to remain

present in your body and awake to whatever is arising. By learning how to face challenge on the yoga mat, you gain the ability to remain present when the inner storms of life are raging off the mat too.